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NEW BOOKS REVIEWED.

BIOGRAPHY.

"LAURENCE STERNE," writes Heine, "is the born equal of William Shakespeare; and he, too, was nurtured by the Muses on Parnassus. But after the manner of women, they quickly spoiled him with their caresses. He was the darling of the pale, tragic goddess. Once, in an access of fierce tenderness, she kissed his young heart with such power, passion and madness that his heart began to bleed, and suddenly he understood all the sorrows of this world and was filled with infinite compassion. Poor young poet heart! But the young daughter of Mnemosyne, the rosy goddess of humor, quickly ran up to him and took the suffering boy in her arms and sought to cheer him with laughter and song; she gave him for playthings the comic mask and the jester's bells and kissed his lips soothingly, kissing upon them all her levity and mirth, all her wit and mockery."

And all these matters are fully set forth in this full and delightful *Life of Laurence Sterne*;* there are levity and mirth and wit and the continuous jangle of the jester's bells, together with the poetry and passion and infinite pathos of a disordered, unguided life. Sterne was a genius, and therefore to read of him is enlivening, since genius, after all, is just being a little more alive than other men, more alert to take impressions, more keen to feel, more able to produce further impressions and stimulate emotions.

From the beginning, as a neglected imp of the barracks, the frail son of an improvident ensign to the ending—a lonely death and unattended burial, Sterne's life seems to have been unguided by anything but his swift and generous impulses, his appetite

* "The Life and Times of Laurence Sterne." By Wilbur L. Cross. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1909.

for fun and his unending interest in human nature and the shifting pageant of life. It was, however, the enthralling career of a great and conquering genius. For did not Lessing say he would gladly lay down ten years of his life to give Laurence Sterne one more in which to write? And Goethe spoke of him as the finest type of wit that ever influenced literature and as having cured him of Wertherism. It was, however, a life totally lacking in dignity. Perhaps it was too alive, too full for order; chaos is always more turbulent, more active than convention and order. At any rate, from the time when, as a neglected child, he was pushed from pillar to post, patronized here and helped a little there, through all his university career, as a Sizar in debt; his struggles for preferment in the church; his wasteful efforts at farming on a large scale; his squabbles with kinsmen and acquaintance; his unexpected and amazing literary successes; his braggart delight in social recognition and his middle-aged love-affairs, Sterne's is a lovable, fascinating, absorbing, unadmirable and unworthy personality. He had the lovable and the unlovable points of the Celt. An interesting and illuminating chapter in the *Life* is that on the publication of "*Tristram Shandy*," giving a vivid picture of a great literary success in the age of Dr. Johnson, Walpole, Garrick, Hogarth and Pitt. A second edition of the great novel was called for in a month, and the obscure country parson and bankrupt farmer found himself a month deep in social engagements, being interviewed by reporters quite like the modern author of a "best seller," being painted and sketched and made much of, while drawing-rooms rang with anecdotes of the witty clergyman who wrote the wickedest book of his age.

Very interesting, too, are the data as to Sterne's reading and his free and easy adaptations and transportations from other authors. Burton's "*Anatomy of Melancholy*," an inexhaustible mine, even to the present day for all thieves of ideas, lay ever open at his elbow when he wrote. His life was full and exciting; as if to offer the proper dramatic contrast at the close he died in London lodgings without a friend or kinsman near and was buried in an obscure spot in the city, whence his body was snatched a few days later and sold to an Oxford surgeon for dissection.

Alas! poor Yorick!

The present excellent biography does much toward rescuing

the fascinating Irish genius from Thackeray's stiff disapproval, and the work is so well done that we completely forget the biographer in the charm of the subject. He has, however, been at infinite pains to gather all available material and verify all details and has given us a book more enthralling than the whole year's fiction.

The Count Lützow, who contributed to the mediæval town series the admirable monograph on Prague and who is the author of an excellent history of Bohemian literature, is the man above all others to give us a final and authoritative *Life of Hus*.^{*} The fact that much of the literary work of Hus has only recently been sifted and printed makes a biography, at the moment, of special value. The old tradition that all Hus's literary activity was crowded into the last few years of his life has been exploded. Dr. Flajshans enumerates seventy-four Latin, one German and thirty-six Bohemian works of Hus and divides his writings into four periods extending over the years from 1402 to his death in 1415. The Bohemian Academy has recently undertaken the publication of the Latin works of Hus and has already included several works that had never before been printed. All this recent research has thrown new light on the great patriot and martyr who paid with his life for being in advance, morally and mentally, of his age. At odds with the wide-spread immorality of the priesthood, incensed by simony and corruption in the church and by the political subjugation of his nation, Hus, with his indomitable courage, his complete self-renouncement, led a great patriotic revolt at the same time that he laid the foundations of the Reformation and the age of rationalism. His life was noble and exalted from first to last, guided by the highest principles of rectitude and devotion to truth. The present *Life*, though it suffers somewhat from repetition and amassed detail, is yet scholarly and reliable and is the best English life there is of Hus.

To those who are awaiting eagerly the authoritative biography of the last representative of the greater Victorian tradition, it

^{*} "The Life and Times of Master John Hus." By the Count Lützow. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1909.